

Dig a Potato Today

A potato grows beneath the surface in a piece of writing. It's the thing that the reader and the writer want to dig up. Listen to the following leads. What questions arise in your minds as you listen?

I was six years old when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength.

Rules of the Game Amy Tan

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning.

Bright Lights Big City Jay McInerney

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you."

The Woman Warrior Maxine Hong Kingston

The name my family calls me is Morning Girl, because I wake up early always with something on my mind."

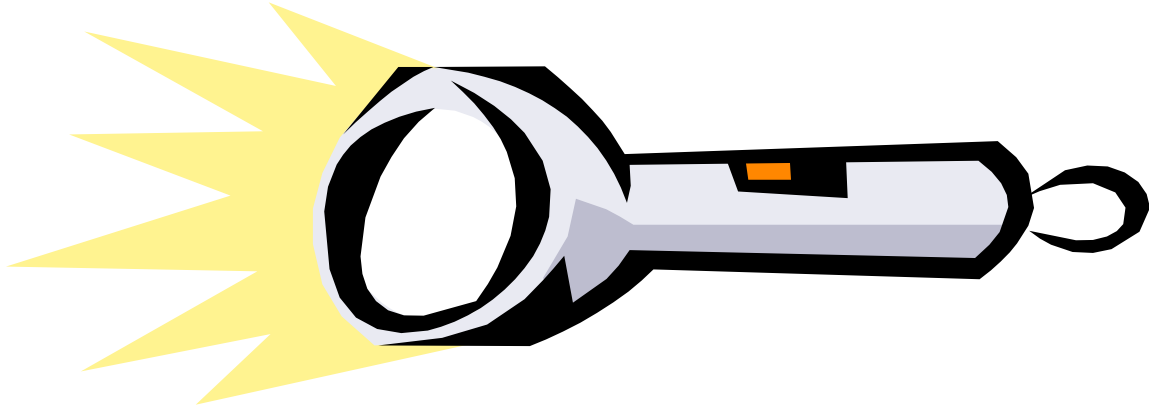
The Morning Girl Michael Dorris

- 1) Tell a story to some friends or read a piece you are working on.
- 2) Have your friends listen and write curious questions on scraps of paper.
- 3) Take your favorite question and turn it into a new lead by answering it in a sentence or two.
For example:
How big was the dog?
It was the biggest dog I'd ever seen.
Is this a true story?

You may not believe it, but what follows is a true story.
- 4) Try finding or writing a new lead to a piece from your writing folder.

Great Questions

- Rise from curious minds
- Cluster together like popcorn
- Are preceded by deep silence
- Have no answer



Leads are
magic flashlights
that shine down
through a story
showing the writer
what to put in
and what to leave out.

John McPhee

The Lead Board

(define your own species of lead)

Find any great leads lately in your reading or living? Put them up on the lead board. Try coming up with your own classifications or use some I've used below.

A Big Potato Lead *Jump into the middle of your story and leave the reader wanting more.*

And suddenly everything stops.

Runa

Alison James

I was six years old when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength.

Rules of the Game

Amy Tan

Every so often that dead dog dreams me up again.

Dog Heaven

Stephanie Vaughn

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "What I am about to tell you."

No Name Woman

Maxine Hong Kingston

A Snapshot Lead *Create a picture in the reader's mind.*

Abraham Lincoln wasn't the sort of man who could lose himself in a crowd. After all, he stood 6 foot 4 inches tall and to top it off he wore a high silk hat. His height was mostly in his long bony legs and when he sat in a chair he seemed no taller than anyone else. It was only when he stood up that he towered about other men.

Lincoln: a photobiography

Russell Freedman

The doorman of the Kilmarnock was six foot two. He wore a pale blue uniform, and white gloves made his hands look enormous. He opened the door of the yellow taxi as gently as an old maid stroking a cat.

Smart Alec Kill

Raymond Chandler

My father came home from work on weeknights long after we had eaten our supper and gotten into our pajamas. The six of us watched from the living room while he sat at the kitchen table to have his supper. My mother sat down his dinner before him, steam rising from the plate she'd kept warm over a pot of boiling water. Loading his fork with his knife, he bent to his dinner, not looking up from his plate until he had pushed it away from him empty.

Daley's Girls

Catherine Brady

A Talking Lead *Maybe you want to start with a line or two of dialogue.*

"Where is he?"

Barney hopped from one foot to the other as he clambered down from the train, peering through the white-faced crowds flooding eagerly to the St. Austel ticket barrier. "Oh, I can't see him. Is he there?"

Over Sea, Under Stone Susan Cooper

"Where is Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

Charlotte's Web

E.B. White

Thinking Lead *Start with a thought inside a character or you.*

Mother taught me to be polite to dragons. Particularly polite, I mean; she taught me to be ordinary polite to everyone. Well, it makes sense. With all the enchanted princess and disguised wizards and transformed kings and so on wandering around, you never know *whom* you might be talking to. But dragons are a special case.

Talking to Dragons

Patricia C. Wrede

As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from--where she was born, who her parents were.

The Color of Water

James McBride

Up until I turned twelve years old the kind of friends I had were what you'd expect. They were my own age more or less. Most of them were born here in Serenity along with me. And all of us went to the same school together.

Onion John

Joseph Krumgold

Dark and Stormy Night Day

Now it's time to enter the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction contest. You need to write bad beginnings. No, not just bad, awful—so awful they are funny. Here are some examples of past winners.

Loretta had been working as the tattoo artist's assistant for only two weeks and already he had designs on her.

Hugh B. King, Fremont California

The full moon jutted out like a malevolent speed bump on the blacktop of night.

Donny Philicione, Belleville, New Jersey

There was a considerable consternation among the cats in the coliseum when it was learned that the tigers were taking the lion's share of the prophets.

Paul Revere had just discovered that someone in Boston was a spy for the British, and when he saw the young woman believed to be the spy's girlfriend in an Italian restaurant he said to the waiter, "Hold the spumoni—I'm going to follow the chick an' catch a Tory."

John L. Ashman, 1995 Grand Prize winner

Now get to work. Send your entries to: Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, Department of English, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192-0090 (www.bulwer-lytton.com)

Rules: "Sentences may be of any length (though you venture beyond 50 or 60 words at your peril), and entrants may submit more than one, but all entries must be "original" and previously unpublished.

Gastropoda mail entries should be submitted on index cards, the sentence on one side and the entrant's name, address, and phone number on the other. (For electronic submissions, see below.)

Entries will be judged by categories, from "general" to detective, western, science fiction, romance, and so on. There will be overall winners as well as category winners.

The official BLFC deadline is April 15 (a date Americans associate with painful submissions and making up bad stories). In truth, though, we will judge anything submitted by the middle of May."

Four Beginnings to a Life

Below are four beginnings to the life of Harriet Tubman, the famous leader of the Underground Railroad, from four different biographies. Notice how each biographer finds a different place to start a life. Try writing your own lead to Harriet's life. Where would you begin? Remember you don't have to start at the beginning. You can begin anywhere you find interesting. Try writing several leads to the biography of a friend or a person whose life you have researched.

Harriet Tubman was a runaway slave who worked most of her life to eliminate slavery in the United States. She grew up in the 19th century, born into one of the cruelest systems of slavery ever created by human beings.

Harriet Tubman and the Fight Against Slavery Bree Burns

Two small black children drew with sticks in the dirt in front of a ramshackle cabin. Their older sister, Minty, whose real name was Harriet Ross, watched them. She wished that she could play, too. But she had work to do. It was a warm fall day. The field hands who picked crops for Edward Borodas would be thirsty. She must carry water to them. Minty picked up the heavy buckets. She had no time for play.

The Story of Harriet Tubman, Conductor of the Underground Railroad
Kate McMullan

Chesapeake Bay forms the western boundary of the section of Maryland which is sometimes called Tidewater Maryland, sometimes called the Eastern Shore. Here there are so many coves and creeks, rivers and small streams, that the land areas are little more than heads or necks of land, almost surrounded by water.

Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad
Ann Petry

Harriet was running.

Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman

Leads in Expository Writing

What's the most boring way you could begin a research report about the human brain? A rattle snake? The United States Constitution? We all know.

"In this report I will tell you about...."

Now that we know that, let's experiment with different places to start.

- ◆ **Start with a Snapshot.** (When you paint a picture, you draw the reader in. Notice the difference between these two leads to a report about ice-skating.)

Boring

Ice-skating is my favorite sport.

Better

It's ten degrees below zero and the river is frozen a foot thick. It makes snapping sounds like the limbs of trees cracking. A lone figure glides along the black ice. Moving towards the city. The only sounds are the scraping of each blade as it bites into the river. That's me doing my favorite sport, ice-skating.

- ◆ **Start with one important observation.** (Don't start in the general. Put your most surprising or important observation into your opening.)

General

The human brain is a complex and amazing organ.

Better

Seeing stars, it dreams of eternity. Hearing birds, it makes music. Smelling flowers, it is enraptured. Touching tools, it transforms the earth. But deprived of these sensory experiences, the human brain withers and dies.

Inside the Brain

Ronald Kohoutek

- ♦ **Start with a strongly stated question your readers might have.** (In some ways all writing is about trying to answer our best questions. A strong question is the one we all want to know the answer to.)

Weakly-stated

In this paper I will attempt to answer the question why history is important.

Better

What's the point of studying history? Who cares what happened long ago? After all, aren't the people in history books dead?

The History of US Joy Hakim

- ♦ **Put your connection with the subject in the lead.** (Why are you attracted to the subject? Do you have a personal reason for writing about this subject? What specific memories of the subject come to mind?)

General

The problem of longitude was one of the greatest scientific challenges of its day.

Better

Once on a Wednesday excursion when I was a little girl, my father bought me a beaded wire ball that I loved. At a touch, I could collapse the toy into a flat coil between my palms, or pop it open to make a hollow sphere. Rounded out it resembled a tiny Earth, because its hinged wires traced the same pattern of intersecting circles that I had seen on the globe in my school room—the thin black lines of latitude and longitude

Longitude Dava Sobel

- ♦ **Flaunt your favorite bit of research in the lead.** (Start with the facts that made you smile, laugh, go "ahaaa!" or just plain grossed you out.)

General

Did you ever wonder why God created flies?

Better

Though we've been killing them for years now, I have never tested the folklore that, with a little cream and sugar, flies taste very much like black raspberries.

The 3 Act story

Many stories and just about all Hollywood movies can be divided into 3 sections. The Set-up where the basic problem or friction is defined, the Mix-up, where things get more complicated and other problems often arise, and the End-up, the resolution where the problems are resolved one way or another. Below you'll find an analysis of the 3 acts of Cinderella. After you see the analysis try defining the 3 acts of one of your stories.

Cinderella

Set-up: She wants to go to the ball and then the Fairy Godmother shows up and makes magic things happen, but she warns what will happen if Cindy doesn't split by 12:00. The conflict is set up.

Mix-up: Though she makes a big hit at the ball she leaves too late and in running away leaves her glass slipper. Her sisters talk about the Princess but don't believe it was their step-sister.

End-up: *The Prince decides to hunt for his Princess and eventually finds the right foot. The story begins sadly and ends happily.*

Comments: *I think the end-up in Cinderella is too short. If I were to re-write the story I would add more about the search for Cinderella or make the ending longer. Walt Disney's writers actually did this by having some invented mice help Cinderella get out of a locked room.*

3 Acts of my story

Below are 3 Boxes for you to define the 3 acts of a story you have written or are about to write. After you write or draw about your 3 acts, ask yourself which act is the strongest, and which could be made stronger by a bigger obstacle or problem or a change in plot line.

Title _____

Set-up

Mix-up

End-up

Types of Endings

“Don’t write endings, find them,” novelist Thomas Williams used to say. Endings grow from beginnings, and reveal themselves through clues within the story, characters or ideas. One way to learn about endings is to observe the different ways authors end a story. See appendix 4 for books with each ending.

The Loop ending

A loop ending ends at the same place it begins. A good children’s book to illustrate this is *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff. Does your story want to end the same place it began?

The Surprise Ending

A surprise ending usually has a twist to it that takes the reader by surprise. In the “Wizard of Oz” movie, we think Dorothy is going home in the balloon with the wizard, then the balloon flies away. How will she get home now? The good witch Glinda comes and shows her the true power of the slippers.

A good mystery story must have a surprise ending. The least likely suspect must be the one who did it. Is your story one that wants to throw the reader a curve ball in the last inning? If so, try writing a surprise ending?

The Summary

And to round off tonight’s newscast, here are the highlights once again. A summary ending repeats the main points of a story trying to tie together any loose ends. This type of ending works well in speeches that are trying to hammer home a point. Is your piece trying to persuade the reader? If so, you may want to end by summing up your best points.

The Happy Ending

Most fairy tales have happy endings (depending on whether you are a wolf-lover, of course). A happy ending such as the one in Cinderella leaves the reader with no feeling of sadness. Like a good warm blanket, it covers us from the cold of life. Is your story a fairy tale? Does it want to end happy, or would it be stronger and more real if it ended sadly?

The Sad but True Ending

When Charlotte dies at the end of Charlotte’s Web we are sad when we read it. But it has to end that way. Try saving Charlotte and the story loses its power. It becomes a lie. I call this the “sad but true” ending. Does your story need to end sadly? Does your happy ending have a false ring? If so, you may want to write a sad but true ending.

Snapshots at All Ages

My supper is alwas the sam
My sister won't eat. My other
sister whines but I just listen to
the crickets.

Delia (2nd grade)

The ladies' dresses are made from milkwood or dandelion fluff, dyed with rose petals. Their aprons are made from flower petals sewn together. Men's clothes are made from leaves sewn together. Hats are made from fiddleheads. Buttons are made from sunflower seeds. These are beginning to sound like fairies, but they aren't, because grown ups are about one and a half feet high and instead of dwarves they are called Pequenoos, (pe-cwain-yoze).

Sarah Connor (5th grade)

She swiftly moves through the air tumbling and leaping. When she's finished with her tricks she bends her back in an arch and has her hands perfectly positioned in a salute. Her short, tiny body helps her glide in her flips. When she's completed doing a back-walkover on the balance beam, she wipes away her anoying wisps of hair from her face, preparing for her next move. When her hair is removed from her face you can see her greenish eyes shining along with her cute, little troll-like nose and a smile that seems never to fade. She is my nine year old sister, Annie.

Sarah (6th grade)

Then I saw her, the queen of the gypsy pack. She stood looking through the spaghetti (gypsies always eat Italian food, I remembered.) She had long, black hair that was twisted into a pig tail, which ran straight down her back. On her ears were two long silver earrings with pearls on the ends. Her coat was old and tattered, stains covering random portions of it. The large maroon pants she wore were partially tucked into her boots.

Her husband walked down the aisle toward her. He had a small pencil thin moustache that stood out on his chubby face. He was a stout little man, dressed in workclothes that were decorated with spotches of paint. In a thickly accented voice he told his wife to hurry up. So the Gypsies must be working nearby, I thought.

My mouth fell open at the sight of the two of them, where did they park their wagon, I wondered, I didn't see it in the parking lot. I turned and ran through the entire store, my mother wasn't leaving me with the Gypsies!

David (college freshman)

Sketch People

Writers often describe a character or a place with two or three quick sentences. This is called a thumbnail sketch, after the quick drawings artists make in their sketchbooks. Read a few that I've collected below and try writing a few yourself. Remember the goal with a thumbnail sketch is to say as much as possible about your subject with only a few well chosen details.

He was one of those men who can be a car salesman or a tourist from Syracuse or a hired assassin.

John D. Macdonald

John Viduary was six feet two inches in height and had the most perfect profile in Hollywood. He was dark, winsome, romantic, with an interesting touch of gray at the temples. His shoulders were wide, his hips narrow. He had the waist of an English guards officer, and his dinner clothes fit him so beautiful it hurt.

Raymond Chandler *Pick up on Noon Street*

He thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere. He *was* pretty handsome too—I'll admit it. But he was mostly the kind of handsome guy that if your parents saw his picture in your Year Book, they'd right away say, "Who is this boy?" I mean he was mostly a Year Book kind of handsome guy.

J.D. Salinger *Catcher in the Rye*

Some people had problems with Benjamin Franklin. They accused him of not having any gravity. Now that doesn't mean he floated around like a weightless space voyager. Gravity has another meaning, as in "grave." No. Not a place where you get buried, but you are getting closer. Someone who is grave is very serious, maybe a bit dull, and certainly not much fun. Ben Franklin did have a problem. He just couldn't stay serious. He was always playing jokes or having fun.

Joy Hakim *Making Thirteen Colonies*

The man was an Indian—dressed in furs and leather, with moccasins that came all the way up to his knees. His skin was dark. His hair was dark, and he wore a dark coloured headband. His eyes sparkled in the sunlight, but the rest of his face was hard as stone.

John Reynolds Gardiner *The Stone Fox*

Another reason I don't like Judd Travers is he spits tobacco out the corner of his mouth, and if he don't like you—and he sure don't like me—he sees just how close he can spit to where you're standing.

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor *Shiloh*

Sketch Places

When writers introduce a setting they often paint a thumbnail sketch of a place. With a few quick brush strokes they evoke a mood, a personality, an aura that goes beyond just physically describing what's there. After you have read a few thumbnail sketches of places below try writing one yourself. You may want to begin by listing a few details of the place, or your feelings about the place and what it reminds you of. You may want to just sit and think about that place for a while and don't start writing till you have an idea, or you may want to just start writing and let the ideas come as you write. Try drawing a picture of your place before or after you write.

The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees and beyond them were more trees. As far as a man could go north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. There were no houses. There were no people. There were only trees and wild animals who had their homes among them.

Laura Ingalls Wilder *The Little House in the Big Woods*

The cab I had was a real old one that smelled like someone'd just tossed his cookies in it. I always get those vomity kind of cabs if I go anywhere late at night. What made it worse, it was so quiet and lonesome out, even though it was a Saturday night. I didn't see hardly anyone on the street. Now and then you just saw a man and a girl crossing the street, with their arms around each other's waist and all, or a bunch of hoodlumpy-looking guys and their dates, all of them laughing like hyenas at something you could bet wasn't funny. New York's terrible when somebody laughs on the street late at night. You can hear it for miles.

J.D. Salinger *Catcher in the Rye*

Pieces of tree, pieces of metal, pieces of seat and wing gleamed in the moonlight. Some of the plane lights remained on, so what was left of the plane twinkled in a friendly way. The plane was immense. It seemed impossible that such a huge thing was ever airborne. It looked bigger and longer than a house, garages and stable. Like some incredibly large, white celestial cigar suddenly ripped in pieces and thrown to the ground.

Caroline B. Cooney *Flight #116 Is Down*

It was the kind of building you saw in some abstract painting. Sugar Cubism, Levin called the style: a series of long white rectangular buildings with dark sliding glass doors and windows shaped like TV screens. Each time he approached the lobby and the doors parted with a whisper he imagined he was entering heaven. The doctors and nurses became wingless angels examining the new arrivals who sat reading magazines in the patent leather lounge chairs.

Barry Lane *Passion Play*

Some Student Thumbnails

Here are some student thumbnail sketches across the grades. More are collected in Appendix B. Make a collection of your own or collect some of your favorites from literature you read.

My dad is sleeping on the white couch and my big white dog is on him. My dad is six feet tall. He is wearing blue jeans and square striped rainbow clothes with no buttons on it. He's dreaming. He has smooth black hair and a black spider is on his nose.

Randall Evans (2nd Grade)

The lady sits there on the couch, with a phone up to her ear. Wearing a plaid nightgown finishing smoking a cigarette. All you smell is the cigarette. A smile on her face. All you hear is a dog scratching at the door.

5th Grade

There was a very strange kid in my class. His name is Bert. We are learning about planets and he claims he is from the planet Zorbort, which he also claims is a planet that humans haven't discovered yet. He doesn't look much different than me or my friends although he has green nails. We are not sure if he paints them or maybe it's just fungus.

5th Grade

My mother is in the kitchen early Christmas morning. She is wearing red flannel pajamas and white slippers. She is singing O Holy Night while making french toast for my brother and I. While sitting in the family room the smell of the cinnamon lingers towards me from the kitchen.

10th Grade

New Thoughts

Pick a page in a book and give a character. Find an interesting character and give them four extra thoughts.

(Thanks to Sherri Masson.)

